

## **New political upheavals and women alliances in solidarity beyond “lock down” in Switzerland at times of a global pandemic**

**Susan Thieme and Eda Elif Tibet (3 June 2020)**

“Because people have to stay home and will be working less they won’t be able to afford their pension in the future. There will be payment gaps. Now the debate is on the interest rates, they are arguing whether people should retire at a later age, why because we are under a crisis and we are all in the same ship, says the authorities. But this is not true we might be at the same sea but not in the same ship. Some of us are journeying in a dingy boat, some in their ships, sailing boats, vessels and luxurious yachts, laborers are already drowning.”  
(May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, Emine Sariaslan)

Quoting Emine Sariaslan<sup>1</sup> a social worker at public health services, refers to the recent most heard metaphor “*we are all in the same ship*” and draws our attention to how people are not affected equally by the governmental measures taken against the increasing spread of the global pandemic COVID-19. She speaks of the common human experience to be not taking place in the same ship but in the same sea, which for some is of comfort and for some is a matter of life and death. Those who are drowning she mentions later in our conversation; to be the health care, retail, service and logistics workers, among them who do not often have Swiss citizenship, lacking full political participation with limited possibilities to claim their rights. “These are the people working on the frontline who make the system function amidst the devastating pandemic” also writes Sariaslan in her recent article at Horizonte<sup>2</sup>. A fact even more striking in a country where formal citizens can shape political decisions in a participatory way, where many referendums have been about migrants without having them present in the discussions. At our interview taking place on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, Sariaslan further claims; “not having migrants to participate in the decision making processes diminish migrant backgrounds into apolitical beings whom are seen as either a surplus or a burden by nationalist parties, ripping them off from their very human rights”.

By addressing the ongoing inequalities in our society, in this paper we aim to show how women alliances in Switzerland could mobilize their forces and influence in shaping state policy, as they have been able to react urgently and took actions immediately during the lock down. Following studies made by

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<sup>1</sup> Emine Sariaslan is a voluntary board member at UNIA , a commissioned writer at the Horizonte, originally from Turkey and a Swiss Citizen. See her profile at <https://public-health-services.ch/portfolio/emine-sariaslan/>

<sup>2</sup> Horizonte is the additional newsletter magazine published as part of the “Work” newspaper ,published by UNIA in five different languages:  
[https://www.unia.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Horizonte\\_Polnisch\\_1\\_2020.pdf](https://www.unia.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Horizonte_Polnisch_1_2020.pdf)

scholars on how intersectional interests can be used to build coalitions within and across social movements increasing the number and diversity of activists (Fisher et al 2017:1; Carasthatis 2013; Cole 2008; ) we look at new political upheavals led by a women coalition between the already active Frauen\*streik movement<sup>3</sup>, Frauen Alliance<sup>4</sup> and Swiss Unions in Switzerland. We interviewed two members of the coalition; Muhterem Hülya Genis and Emine Sariaslan<sup>5</sup>, in learning their activities that correspond to the needs of those hit by COVID-19, that shaped the premises of new political upheavals.

Our analysis based on our conversations with the activists, informed on how current activism around the pandemic is built on the existing social movement Frauen\*streik that helped mobilizing a wide range of women with different backgrounds within the streets and the parliament and in areas in between, in responding to those hit by the pandemic. The movement hence became mobilized in meeting the urgency of the COVID-19 impact particularly on labor rights and in extending one of the criteria “willingness to participate within the economic life” from the Swiss Integration law (passed on 2019). The coalition have been able to shift the discourse on how “work” has not become a matter of “will” but are determined by “restrictions” and “inabilities to access” along with many other complex processes affecting peoples’ participation into the economic life during the pandemic.

## **For those on the frontline but in the backyard of Swiss politics**

“The oppressed are always the working class and laborers that also include migrants within these categories and these categories are also differentiated according to their residence permits from B, C to N. Last year according to the new migrants law the number one criteria for integration has become to have a job, second is to know the language, and permits are prolonged as such, if this person is not a burden to the state... however since people are losing their jobs as of now, they will not be allowed to stay in Switzerland and won’t be able to apply to RAV (unemployment fund) either. As the UNION we have made a concentrated meeting on this issue and have intervened starting with the case of

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<sup>3</sup> Women across Switzerland took to the streets by about 500,000 on June 14 2019 in a historic strike called as Frauen\*streik, demanding equal treatment and conditions compared with their male counterparts, See :

[https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment\\_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950) and official web page: <https://frauenstreik2019.ch>

<sup>4</sup> Frauen Alliance is an umbrella organization for over 100 women's organizations, established 120 years ago in Switzerland. Defines itself to be the voice of women in Swiss politics and does advocacy to achieve equality between women and men - in society, in business and in politics. Alliance F is non-partisan and its’ members include women (and men) from all major political parties, including active and former national, state and federal councilors. See their web site: <https://de.alliancef.ch>

<sup>5</sup> Both participants did not see a need to anonymize their voices and gave consent to publish their points of view.

the Portuguese service providers in Zermatt whose rich employers wanted to fire them that would have resulted in their deportation, we did not let that happen.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17th 2020)

According to unions there has never been a time where a majority of Swiss society (of working-age people) has faced the risk of unemployment<sup>6</sup> with applications to RAV (Regional Employment Centre) for claims to the ALK (Unemployment insurance fund) are of record numbers. Many of the employers have been reported to try cutting the unforeseen loss of their revenues by ending peoples jobs in these peculiar times. For those with temporary residence permits losing a job equally means to lose residence permit, without residence they are not allowed to benefit from their unemployment insurance. Those self-employed (including citizens too), and those with daily contracts are also not given the chance to apply for the unemployment funds.

“Migrants are losing their jobs but not only, they are also blamed for not being integrated as they cannot meet the number one criteria of integration; which is to have a job. So at our meeting we asked and proposed the Federal state (Swiss Union Confederation met the Federal Congress) that this should not be the case for the time being, especially those who were on the verge of applying to citizenship should still be able to do so. The implementation needs to be at the cantonal level, if needed they should also be able to get funds from the state, so we as well proposed a bridging fund. We also started a petition for those families who have lost 10-20 % of their income (particularly for those families with one sole bread winner) to be able to apply to the social and to receive the entire salary, called Kurzarbeit<sup>7</sup>. This process has shown us how important it is to be a UNION member, and how important it is to act together... those who did not want to pay 10-20 francs subscription are now lined up at the door. We also give 15 mins free consultancy for those who are not members yet. We also published political responses and this created pressure for the employers.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17th 2020)

The coalition demanded the extension of the integration rule and made their proposition be accepted in the federal level. UNIA<sup>8</sup> continues to consult non-

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<sup>6</sup> According to the number given by SECO as of April 2020, there are 153.413 unemployed people: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/289105/umfrage/arbeitslosenzahl-in-der-schweiz-nach-monaten/>

<sup>7</sup> See the petition at: [https://www.solidarisch-aus-der-krise.ch/?fbclid=IwAR2EapVBRVuRvSeuiAPU4nt1Fz\\_PwJaSnnNP0o1T\\_VF0SoO-vbX5c\\_zEs6M#aufufr](https://www.solidarisch-aus-der-krise.ch/?fbclid=IwAR2EapVBRVuRvSeuiAPU4nt1Fz_PwJaSnnNP0o1T_VF0SoO-vbX5c_zEs6M#aufufr)

<sup>8</sup> UNIA, is a trade union in Switzerland that operates as the largest unemployment fund in Switzerland and a member of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions. It has around 190,000 members from all sectors of the private economy, offers individual advice, legal protection and further services to its members. With more than 50 % of UNIA members not having a Swiss

union members for 15 minutes a day, and raises awareness through public discussions, newsletters, forums and webinars.

## **Our power is our movement**

Another dimension of care, supported by political decisions where citizens without Swiss passports are often affected but have not been part of the political decision making, is child care. Child care, especially for young children is little supported and institutionalized by the state. A fact particularly hard, for people working in 24/7 health care and retail jobs lacking parents and grandparents for care support close by. Muhterem Hülya Genis, originally from Turkey, today a Swiss citizen, organizing committee member of Bern Frauen\*streik and a kindergarten care worker (*kita worker*) highlights;

“Women’s burden was quite heavy already now it is even more with having to work from home and take care of the child at the same time under such hostility...The System should see that it cannot produce anything without us, the women, the world is experiencing the invaluableity of currency and that one needs to respect labor. Those who have a contract can stay home but among my friends who are day laborers as child care takers got fired. You can apply to RAV but with a reduction of 20 % of your usual salary, that is nearly thousand francs difference, enough to destroy your entire livelihood. The weight of the virus is on the top of the poor. At least our taxes can be given back, there should be a difference in the way rich and poor are being treated in terms of taxes. We need concrete steps into securing work contracts and making sure working conditions are safe.”  
(Muhterem Hülya Genis, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

Touching on the inequalities between higher incomes and lower, Hülya stresses the need for a different treatment by the state for those of limited income and precarious working conditions. Emine supports Hülya’s concerns about how “staying at home” for women can have fatal consequences for their mental wellbeing and socio-economic welfare:

“Whenever there is a crisis, women are immediately given the task to stay home anyway. They should be taking care of domestic work, and as they withdraw from their jobs their economic independence is shaken, this also has to do with their pension frames, since they can work less they can pay less for their pension and when they retire they will be getting less in return and will perhaps struggle to meet the ends in the future. Since this crisis seems to go in the long run, the situation is going to affect their economic independence on the long run too. Women’s dependence for men will affect women’s psychology and that will have

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passport UNIA is the largest organization for workers without Swiss citizenship. See the official web site: <https://www.unia.swiss>, accessed 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

an impact on their children's education and homeschooling if necessary...this is the Domino effect." (Emine Sariaslan, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

According to the activist duo, street presence is very important as Emine affirms the need to be able to continue gathering in streets as she speaks of the way to overcome the Domino effect is to unite and move together in the most physical stance. Furthermore, "togetherness is our insurance", adds Hülya;

"We managed to collect 500.000 women all across Switzerland for the strike, with 70.000 of them in Bern. With one year of intensive labour we managed as the coordination group, 20-30 of us. Our movement had a novel impact on the politics, we have increased women participation into the parliament by 40%<sup>9</sup>. This is a huge success, our power is our movement. We have a power of 500.000 women. Our togetherness is our insurance, if we do not have that then we are deemed to creep and suffer." (*Muhterem Hülya Genis*, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

Talking of those without an insurance, "insurance" is to be provided by "togetherness", and are among the core motivations behind the active solidarity beyond the lockdown. Building on one of the largest political demonstration<sup>10</sup> in the recent history of Switzerland that took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2019, Frauen\*streik will possibly go digital on 2020 and take creative forms of online protests, talks, artistic performances and webinars, says Hülya that is still yet to be decided and implemented. Continuing to address and redefine what the pandemic has yet to bring and transform, the Frauen Alliance came up with a new agenda to four different target groups to be collectively supported; 1) Underrepresented and under paid women, 2) Women facing domestic violence, 3) Migrant women and asylum seekers and 4) Women in politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Starting with a number of only 20 to 30 organization members made Frauen\*streik come into life and made thousands of women to participate across Switzerland (70.000 women gathered only in Bern). A further claim by the activists is that the strike ended up increasing women's political participation into the parliament by 40 % on 2019. As of now there remains no official data or research to verify the very connection between the strike and the increase ratio of women in the parliament, but we suggest to keep an eye on the recent studies to follow up the claim.

<sup>10</sup> June 14, 2019 goes down as the largest political demonstration in the recent history of Switzerland, bigger than the women's first strike in Switzerland on 1991 according to "the Swiss Trade Union Federation" : [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment\\_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/equal-treatment_women-s-strike-gets-underway-across-switzerland/45030950)





*Protestors fill in through the narrow streets to the center facing the parliament in Bern, Switzerland. Image taken by Eda Elif Tibet , Frauen\*streik, 14 June 2019.*



*Emine Sariaslan addresses the protesting crowd as she speaks of liberty, freedom and justice for migrant women, behind her stands Muhterem Hülya Genis who also addresses the crowd for an un-discriminating world and a more participatory democracy inclusive for all. Image taken by Eda Elif Tibet , Frauen\*streik, 14 June 2019.*

Lastly, Emine Sariaslan speaks of the importance of science, the need for it to be independent from state politics and the role it plays in contributing to national and international solutions to the benefit of people underrepresented in political debates and decisions.

“Science is very important particularly now, they were making fun with professors before, now everyone looks into what science has to say. Politics and science is in a conflict, politics look into economy but the independence of scientists are so important, for whom am I making science? All scientists should be questioning that, they should be doing this for humanity. The problem being more then global it is international, so the solution should also be international. All this requires drastic and integrated action and makes it critical to start planning for a post- COVID-19 world as soon as possible.” (Emine Sariaslan, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2020)

In the most urgent sense, the coalition calls on Switzerland to treat all people living in Switzerland independent from having a Swiss passport or not when confronting the COVID-19 pandemic through the co-creation of an evidence-based policymaking structure that urges decision makers to take into account the research of not just one but many disciplines, including social sciences such as mobility and migration scholars. As academic scholars, we are convinced that this policy vision will lead to more sustainable, equal and diverse societies based on national and international solidarity, and to ones that can better prevent and deal with shocks and pandemics to come.

What we perceive is a contradiction ; on how the so called global pandemic requires a globally concerted action but at the same time is converted into a national security problem. We do not only close borders (within and beyond the lockdown) to feel protected but also measure and value workforce, intellectual capacity and contributions to our society not on an equal basis but measure through formal citizenship that becomes the decisive category to be “in” or “out” of the society. Most of the research being done on the pandemic in Switzerland are done in collaboration with researchers without Swiss passports, and the underrepresentation of the majority of the academics in this field is even more striking. It is here where sadly and gratefully social movements and alliances remind us the importance of international solidarity in the fight of recognition. This is not only true for the most precarious workers but also for scholars facing precarity with short term contracts and no Swiss passports who are working and contributing to the high international standards of Swiss universities, and are put on hold at the moment due to their citizenships. Acknowledging those hardest hit by this peculiar crisis, we urge politicians, policy-makers and the general public to respond to the need of redefining formal citizenship, representation and further visibility , so to be able to govern a much inclusive , participating and healthy society.

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